

TECHNOLOGY TO THE RESCUE FOR LOW VISION

No matter how poor our vision may be, we still want to be as active and independent as possible. Modern technology has made a great many devices available to help us.

You know you have low vision when, even with eyeglasses or contact lenses, medicine, or surgery, you still find that:

- you strain to see the TV and it is no longer relaxing,
- mail and newsprint are difficult to read,
- faces are hard to recognize,
- playing-cards all look alike,
- writing a letter and signing your name is a challenge, and
- appliances are hard to use because you can't see the number settings.

It is important to see your eye doctor as soon as you notice such symptoms. While losing some vision is part of normal aging, these symptoms may be warnings of eye disease. Sometimes an early diagnosis can result in treatment that will help you retain your remaining vision.

There are many devices -- from simple handheld magnifiers to complex talking computers. Depending upon each person's condition, some people will manage to write letters with a template, while others might want to learn Braille.

Because most people don't know where to find assistance, nor what specific devices are best, your doctor may refer you to a low vision specialist, an ophthalmologist or optometrist, who is trained to evaluate vision, prescribe visual devices, and teach people how to use them. >>>

Equally important is a vision rehabilitation program in which you are taught techniques to help you adapt to your vision loss. A rehabilitation specialist will come to your house or office and help you determine what needs to be changed so you can function independently. For example, in a kitchen, putting wide tape along the edge of kitchen counters will help you to place food and dishes safely and marking stove heat settings with raised marks or numbers can make all the difference between being able to use the stove or not. There are several ways to mark cans for easy identification. While certainly low tech, many simple ideas can make a big difference.

Catalogues carry many low tech and high tech devices to buy. There are talking clocks and devices for enlarging TV screens. There are high intensity magnifying lamps, talking microwave ovens, and talking phone adapters that say the numbers as they are being dialed. Thermometers can talk, as can scales (both personal and for cooking), and even tape measures. No more mismatched socks with talking color identifiers -- by placing a sensor on an object (clothing, flowers, liquids) a voice will announce the color. There are small, portable paper money identifiers, too. Besides large-number and Braille telephones, there are speaking dictionaries and computers.

Find out what is available and what would be most useful for you. Call the Wisconsin Bureau for the Blind at toll-free 888-879-0017 for full information. The Bureau provides direct services, acts as a clearing house for information, and makes appropriate referrals throughout the state. Other places to call:

The Council of the Blind provides low vision services and sells adaptive equipment. Call 800-783-5213 (TTY 608-255-3301). > > >

In Milwaukee, call the Badger Association of the Blind at toll-free 877-258-9200.

To borrow free talking books, call your local public library **or the WI Regional Library for the Blind and Physically Handicapped** at 800-242-8822 (TTY 414-286-3548).

Other groups to call: the Lions Foundation at 877-463-6953 (TTY 715-677-6999) and the Lighthouse National Center at 800-334-5497 (TTY 212-821-9713).